



Columnist Robert De Andreis

My lousy life

I was horrified to read last week that *The Sentinel* had indicated I was on vacation. What a cruel euphemism. The impact of my absence, the first column missed due to illness, was minimized. I imagine when I die they'll say I'm on hiatus.

No, I was not on vacation last week. I was on the floor of my apartment, alone, crawling around on my hands and knees, too weak to walk, with a case of full-blown pneumonia. I was coughing up blood for weeks, and I attributed it to all the medicinal marijuana I have to smoke to help me forget how dismal things really are.

The hardest thing about dying a slow, painful death is admitting what your prospects are really like. Let me give you a hint: they don't look so hot. As my final season winds down, I have worked hard at trying to see this phase of my life as natural and not as something peculiar or out of the ordinary. When I start to see the dying process as an integral part of a whole life, it becomes less frightening and more natural, like a good night's sleep after a hard day's work.

Why are people such death wimps? It's certainly no stranger; in fact, it walks among us. Death is the imperfections of ordinary life, the simple inequities, the banal conclusions of mediocre mini-dramas. Death is the shit of everyday life: the scuffs on your shoes, the run in your stockings, the weeds in your garden, the mold in your bathtub, the dried housefly on your windowsill, the yellow leaf on your house plant, the goldfish floating on the top of the tank, the yep dog discovered in the dryer, the storm before the calm and the

night after a lousy day.

Why are people so frightened of those stages when people become so helpless and emaciated? What you are seeing is an unnatural portrait of a dying person created by modern medicine. The phenomenon of the chronically feeble, prolonged vegetative state is a choice, not a rule. If you wish to spend the last year of your life in this state, under constant care, pumped with drugs, fed through tubes, cleaned, wiped and bathed by someone 24 hours a day — that is your choice. But why? Usually that kind of final stage nightmare happens because the patient never wanted to plan for it and ended up strapped down to a bed with a tube shoved up his withered ass because he thought he was going to live forever.

One day I may walk into my doctor's office with a later stage of infection that is essentially incurable, but can be prolonged by treatments that may be more painful than the disease. At that point, I may weigh all my options and simply elect to stop the madness and the medicines, to begin a planned, comfortable process of letting go, of comfort and morphine-induced pain management, of no longer eating, of falling into a deep, heavy sleep. I could die tomorrow, free and clear, knowing I filled my purpose on this planet. I have no desire to hang on to the bitter end, let alone write about it.

PHOTO: COLUCCI

This so-called writing career continues to be one of the most frustrating jobs I've ever had. Never have I worked so hard and received so little, besides beautiful letters from strangers. Sick people are relegated to the fringes of society and if they have anything to say about their condition, they are exploited first then shoved to the sidelines. This June will be the third Gay Freedom Day celebration since I've been writing that once again will pass me by. I have never been invited to participate in the smallest way. Last year I couldn't even get a press pass!

I read about AIDS events, benefits, speakers and panels after they're over. People ask me why I never show up at any AIDS functions. The answer is simple: I am never invited. I am out of that elitist social loop, and to all those AIDS social coordinators who see me as some big AIDS figure in the community, but continue to snub me, I have three words for you: Fuck you all!

Of course, in real life I don't give a shit about traditional success any more or I would have quit long ago. I'm just bitching today to warn any would-be AIDS writers waiting in the wings that this job has generated as many perks as a deflated Wonderbra™. My life has always been free of material trappings, with an emphasis on the simple pleasures of the physical world: health, sex, beauty and the occasional joint, yet these carefree joys have been stripped from my life and all that remains is the ruins, like the demolished cathedral walls left standing in Europe after the war. A Nazi virus has invaded my body and I am huddled up in my attic, writing like Anne Frank, although if I was stuck in a stuffy attic with my family I'm sure I'd be much more real: "Dear Kitty, the next person who farts up here is going right out that trap door!"

I miss my health. I used to love to walk for miles and flirt with men along the way. I have watched the erosion of my physical beauty, like a meadow washed downhill in a mudslide. I miss picking up men. I see them on the street and they just walk on by. Yes, they still look, not to cruise, but to stare at the KS on my face. More than anything, I miss my sex drive, drained from my dick like a botched oil change.

Some people hang on to the bitter end because they are afraid to let go. But the road home is paved with many little deaths which don't always lead to life at any cost.

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